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ABSTRACT

Because the Reagan administration believes that the problem of illiteracy must be countered with strong action at all levels of government and education in concert with the private sector, President Reagan announced the Adult Literacy Initiative last September. The initiative, which is based on the premise that the private sector has a keen interest in the promotion of literacy, encourages cooperative efforts by the public and private sectors as well as the recruitment of literacy volunteers. Through the National Institute of Education, the Department of Education will establish the National Adult Literacy Project--a program that will identify model literacy programs and develop and test new literacy materials. To utilize untapped student resources, the Department of Education plans to launch a pilot program in which college work-study students will be employed to teach adults how to read. College students and federal employees alike will be encouraged to serve as literacy volunteers. In addition, the Adult Literacy Initiative will encourage literacy efforts from the following segments of society: state and local officials, minority communities, special education groups, and groups serving disabled persons. (MN)

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TOWARD A LEARNING SOCIETY

The Reagan Administration's Adult Literacy Initiative

By T. H. Bell

Secretary of Education

"In a world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace," the National Commission on Excellence in Education states, ". . . educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society." At the heart of the Learning Society is a commitment to life-long learning; a belief that education is important not only because of what it contributes in material rewards, but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life; and an understanding that education extends beyond the classroom and into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life.

We cannot create the ideal Learning Society until we have become the Literate Society. At the National Forum on Excellence in Education last December, I suggested that the first priority for America's elementary and secondary schools should be to help every student attain the highest possible level of literacy. Each student should be able to read with comprehension, write and think systematically and logically, and speak with clarity and precision. Yet, our schools are only part of the answer. The entire Nation must make a full and unambiguous commitment to the promotion of literacy.

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Adult functional illiteracy is a major "hidden" problem in the United States that affects Americans without regard to race, gender, or economic status. An estimated 23 million Americans are functionally illiterate; they are unable to read, comprehend, write or compute at a level which enables them to function in a complex world. The startling truth is that one in five adult Americans are unable to read a ballot, fill out a job application, read the directions on a bottle of aspirin, or calculate the change required for bus fare.

Each year, an estimated 2 million people join the pool of individuals who are functionally illiterate. Most of these "new illiterates" are legal or illegal immigrants or American citizens who leave school without learning how to read and write.

The cost of illiteracy is high, both to the individual and to society. Functionally illiterate adults have extreme difficulty finding and keeping a job. Nationwide, illiteracy diminishes productivity and contributes to unemployment and underemployment.

Studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between illiteracy and crime. A majority of the Nation's prison population is functionally illiterate.

As many as 15 million employed adults may be functionally illiterate; untold billions of dollars are wasted due to clerical errors, mistakes on production lines, or industrial accidents caused by functional illiterates on the job.

President Reagan has said, "We're a people who believe that each generation will stand upon the shoulders of the one before it, the accomplishments of each ever greater than before." That compact between generations is broken when functionally illiterate adults cannot adequately help their children with their homework.

Rapid advances in technology exacerbate the problem of adult illiteracy by raising the skill and knowledge levels required to perform well in an increasingly complex society. Unless we make a concerted effort at this time, the number of Americans who are functionally illiterate will increase dramatically as our economy and society become more complex. A rising tide lifts all boats, but we must not allow those citizens who cannot read to be left standing on the dock.

The potential increase in illiteracy must be countered with strong action at all levels of government and education, in concert with the private sector. To expand the Nation's resources for combating adult illiteracy, President Reagan announced the Adult Literacy Initiative last September. The

Administration's initiative draws upon past accomplishments and current successes; avoids duplication of effort by fostering cooperation; and encourages the development of new programs involving the vast resources of American society.

The private sector has a keen interest in the promotion of literacy. This year, U.S. businesses and corporations will spend approximately $40 billion on programs to teach their employees skills which they failed to learn in school.

The Department of Education and the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives are working closely with business and industry to encourage cooperation between the private sector and public programs that combat illiteracy. The Partnerships in Literacy program is patterned after Partnerships in Education, the President's program under which businesses and organizations "adopt" local schools and donate volunteer hours and certain school supplies. Private sector literacy initiatives have been encouraging. B. Dalton Booksellers, for example, has pledged $3 million to help fund volunteer programs. Harold W. McGraw, Jr., chairman of McGraw-Hill, Inc., recently launched a new foundation, the Business Council for Effective Literacy, to enlist the help of business and industry in addressing the national problem of adult illiteracy. Mrs. Barbara Bush, wife of the Vice President, is working closely with leaders of the private sector in connection with her personal campaign to promote literacy.

In cooperation with the private sector, the Department of Education is conducting a national awareness campaign to recruit literacy volunteers and encourage private sector funding of literacy efforts. One component of this campaign is a toll-free telephone number linked to a computerized database of all literacy programs across the country.

Within the Department, we have taken a close look at current programs to identify ways to use existing resources and programs to combat adult illiteracy.

Through the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Department of Education will establish the National Adult Literacy Project. This program will identify model literacy programs and develop and test new literacy materials.

We believe that some programs can be directed to serve more than one end. Under the College Work-Study program, the Federal Government provides up to 80 percent of the funds for salaries of students working in part-time jobs. For fiscal year 1985, President Reagan is requesting $850 million in funding for this program -- an increase of 53 percent over the 1984 level.

To utilize untapped student resources, the Department of Education has selected 18 colleges and universities that receive work-study funds to participate in a pilot program that will

employ college work-study students to teach adults how to read. These pilot institutions, selected on the basis of a demonstrated commitment to adult literacy efforts, will manage work-study adult education activities and pay students from Federal work-study funds.

The involvement of college work-study students in literacy is a new approach that will provide benefits to both students and adults. Adults will receive the help of a large and energetic pool of student tutors and helpers. Participating college students will be able to contribute toward their education, acquire valuable teaching and tutoring experience, and gain insight into community service and human needs. The Administration is encouraging all 3,400 schools participating in the college work-study program to develop similar literacy projects.

The Adult Literacy Initiative promotes college student volunteerism in literacy efforts. The Department recently provided start-up funding to the Washington Education Project to give college students an opportunity to take college courses for credit that involve teaching literacy skills to the poor. In Miami, Florida, a similar project involves over 1,000 students at 14 community agencies. This outstanding idea could readily be adopted by colleges and universities across the country.

The Department of Education has asked the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) to encourage the participation of Federal employees as literacy volunteers and provide assistance in making space available for literacy tutoring. FICE will provide a cadre of Federal employees to work as volunteers in on-going state and local adult literacy programs. This program will be officially launched by summer 1984.

At the Federal level, the Adult Literacy Initiative includes a commitment to the innovative direction of available resources and a closer cooperation among existing programs and agencies. Illiteracy is a personal and national tragedy. The Administration's goal is to use Federal resources more effectively. In addition, the Adult Literacy Initiative will encourage literacy efforts from segments of society that are absolutely essential to the Nationwide promotion of literacy: state and local officials, minority communities, and handicapped and special education groups.

When President Reagan took office, only a handful of states had task forces on education. Today, all 50 states have education task forces. The Nation's governors responded enthusiastically to the recommendations of the National Commission on Excellence in Education and other national education commissions. This Administration is encouraging governors to respond with similar energy to the Adult Literacy Initiative. Our goal is an adult

literacy council in every state. To help achieve this objective, the Department of Education will work with state officials to start or expand literacy councils, conduct briefings on the Adult Literacy Initiative, and disseminate literature on successful literacy efforts.

Approximately 40 percent of all minority youth may be functionally illiterate. The Department is working closely with the Assault on Illiteracy Program (AOIP), a consortium of black leaders who have a sincere commitment to increasing literacy among the black community. In March, the Department of Education, in cooperation with AOIPS, hosted an adult literacy workshop attended by representatives of major black organizations. I look forward to a continued productive working relationship with AOIP that focuses on the special literacy needs of black adults.

The disabled population has unique problems which both increase the need for literacy services and make the delivery of such services more difficult. The Adult Literacy Initiative includes a commitment to encourage the coordination of literacy services for the disabled. Representatives of the major national organizations that work with the disabled have helped us to plan a large conference to be held in May to discuss ways to improve the coordination of literacy services for the disabled.

The strength of the Adult Literacy Initiative lies in its emphasis on cooperation and coordination. We will win our battle against illiteracy when we all work together. I cannot think of a more important fight. As the National Commission on Excellence in Education stated:

> The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy and training essential to this new era will be disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life.

A high level of literacy among all our citizens is essential to the continued vitality of our society.